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ABSTRACT

Although research has shown the problems associated with being the offspring of an alcoholic, not all such offspring are maladjusted. To investigate the relationships among variables associated with the adjustment of children of alcoholic fathers, 30 offspring of alcoholic fathers and 40 controls, aged 18 to 23 years, completed demographic, environmental, social support, and coping measures. An analysis of the results showed that children of alcoholics reported more distressing situations than did children of non-alcoholics. Children of alcoholics also used emotion-focused coping strategies more often than problem-focused coping. In examining the interaction of variables, it was found that 40% of the variance in the depression pronenesss of offspring of alcoholics could be accounted for by the degree to which the family encouraged independence, the amount of informational support available, and the degree to which self-blame was used. In addition, 40% of the variance in self-esteem could be accounted for by family cohesion and the degree to which emotion-focused coping was used. These findings support an interactional approach to the examination of offspring adjustment. (BL)

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# Variables Associated with the Adjustment of Offspring of Alcoholic Fathers

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## Variables Associated with the Adjustment of Offspring of Alcoholic Fathers

Researchers have reported in detail the problems associated with being the offspring of an alcoholic, such as lowered self-esteem (Hughes, 1977; McLachlan, Walderman, & Thomas, 1973), proneness to depression (Hughes, 1977), serious role confusion (Nardi, 1981), school and social difficulties (Chafetz, 1979), and general personality disturbances (Sloboda, 1974). Not all offsoring, however, suffer maladjustment. El-Guebaly and Offord (1979) noted that there are a substantial number of offspring of alcoholics who become well-adjusted, productive adults without manifesting any pathology. To date, the factors that may contribute to an offspring's successful avoidance of serious harm have not been adequately investigated. Heller, Sher, & Benson (1982) suggested that there have been theoretical and methodological biases that have led to a disregard for those demonstrating healthy adjustment.

This study adopted an interactional model of adjustment as a framework from which to investigate the relationships among variables that may provide insight into the adjustment of offspring of alcoholics. An interactional model of adjustment views a person's reactions to potentially harmful life circumstances within the context of various intervening variables (Billings & Moos, 1981; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). Pearlin and his colleagues (1981), for example, suggested that people confront potentially stressful situations with various behaviors, perceptions and cognitions

that have the potential to alter or mediate the impact of the situation. In order to understand a person's reaction to a potentially harmful situation it is necessary to consider the effects of moderating variables, which include problem situations, environment, social support, and coping.

Moderator variables were assessed via demographic data, a scale of family-problem situations, developed for the current study (Life Situation Checklist, Clair & Genest, 1983), a measure of family environment (Family Environment Scale, Moos & Moos, 1981), a measure of social support (Dimensions of Social Support Scale, Cohen, 1977, cited by Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981), and a coping response measure (Ways of Coping Checklist, Aldwin, Folkman, Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1980). All of the above data, except for demographics, was assessed retrospectively in reference to the 13- to 18-year period, and each measure was related to measures of current adjustment (Depression-Proneness Rating Scale, Zemore, 1983; Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, Fitts, 1965).

The sample in this study included 30 offspring of alcoholic fathers and non-alcoholic mothers, and 40 comparison subjects from non-alcoholic families, between 18 and 23 years of age. Details concerning the specific method of obtaining subjects is available elsewhere (Clair & Genest, 1984).

The Life Situation Checklist, developed for this study, provided extensive descriptive information concerning differences and similarities in problem situations between alcoholic and non-alcoholic families (see Appendix A). For example, it was found

that distressing situations faced by children of alcoholics are often not a unique function of parental alcoholism, but of general family breakdown. As was expected, children of alcoholics acknowledged the occurrence of many more situations (M 18.47, S.D. = 4.38) than children of non-alcoholics (M = 3.38, S.D. = 3.06; $t$ = 32.3, $p < .001$). In addition, offspring of alcoholics evaluated most of the LSC situations as moderately to extremely distressing.

Offspring of alcoholics were more likely than comparison subjects to appraise problems in their families as unchangeable, $\chi^2$ (1) = 4.24, $p < .05$. Responses to the coping scale, in reference to these situations, indicated that offspring of alcoholics used emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g., letting feeling out) more than problem-focused coping (e.g., made a plan of action to follow), whereas comparison subjects used each of these strategies equally. Offspring of alcoholics acknowledged using emotion-focused coping strategies more than comparison subjects. In addition, children of alcoholics reported using more avoidant strategies (e.g., smoking, drinking, eating) than children of non-alcoholics.

The two subject-groups' scores were significantly different on the Depression-Proneness Rating Scale, $t$ (68) = 2.16, $p < .05$, but not on the measure of self-esteem, $t$ (68) = 1.48, $p > .10$. Given the variability and overlap of subjects' adjustment scores, it was clear that group membership alone would not serve as an accurate predictor of an offspring or a comparison subjects' adjustment. In order to account for significant amounts of

variance in respondents' levels of adjustment, it was necessary to examine the relationships among the measures of family environment, social support, coping, and adjustment.

Correlations between the moderator variables and the adjustment measures revealed patterns of significant associations. For example, family environment dimensions (e.g., cohesiveness, expressiveness) were related to the levels of adjustment in both subject-groups. The number of problems situations (LEC scores) were unrelated to offspring-of-alcoholics' levels of adjustment, but strongly associated with psychological disturbances in offspring of non-alcoholics, suggesting that the occurrence of specific disruptive situations is less relevant to the adjustment of offspring in alcoholic families than is the general level of functioning of the family.

In order to test the utility of an interactional model of adjustment as a means of investigating the adjustment or risk-status of children of alcoholics, multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine the following: (a) the degree to which family situation measures (FES subscales) predict adjustment; (b) the increase in predictiveness by including support measures; and (c) the predictiveness added by including coping measures. Results from these analyses resulted in the ability to predict up to 49% of the variance on adjustment indices by moderator variables. For example, the degree to which an alcoholic family encouraged independence, the amount of informational support available and the degree to which self-blame was used, accounted for 49% of the variance in offspring-

of-alcoholics' depression-proneness scores. In addition, the cohesion of the family, and the degree to which an offspring used problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping accounted for 40% of the variance in offsprings' scores on the self-esteem scale. In general the results of the multiple regression analyses demonstrated the utility of an interactional model of adjustment as a framework for investigating offsprings' reactions and risk-status.

This study represents an initial step toward understanding the adjustment of offspring of alcoholics: (a) It indicated which potentially distressing situations are most commonly faced by the children of alcoholics and which are appraised as most disruptive; (b) the strategies used to cope with these disruptive situations were catalogued; (c) relationships between family environment dimensions and young-adult adjustment were identified; (d) the role of social support as a potential moderator of the effects of parental alcoholism was noted; and (e) the insight into the moderating effects of family environment, social support and coping behavior provide persons devising treatment programmes for children of alcoholics with valuable information. This final point is especially relevant considering the recent growth of treatment programmes for the offspring of alcoholics (Hawley & Brown, 1981; Kern, Tippman, Fortgang, & Paul, 1977), which have been developed without knowledge of the variables that may moderate the deleterious effects of having an alcoholic parent (Miller & Jang, 1977).

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Appendix A

Response Rate and Distressfulness Appraisals on Life Situations Checklist

Offspring/Comparison
N = 30 / N = 40

| Problem situations | # of yes responses | Mean Distressfulness 1 = not distressing 5 = extremely distressing |
|---|---|---|
| Your father is beligerent to family members. | 25/ 8 | 4.32/3.50 |
| Your mother is very confiding in you. | 21/17 | 2.24/1.77 |
| You find it difficult to do homework at home. | 20/14 | 3.37/2.21 |
| Your parents have frequent violent arguments. | 25/ 7 | 4.56/3.00 |
| Your father is displaying very bizarre behavior. | 24/ 4 | 4.46/3.75 |
| Your mother is very caring of your father when he tries to quit drinking. | 17/ 2 | 1.94/3.50 |
| Your father is destructive. | 12/ 1 | 4.25/4.00 |
| You are unsure what to do about your father's drinking. | 25/ 1 | 4.44/2.00 |
| Your mother criticizes your father. | 21/22 | 3.38/2.27 |
| Your father quits drinking and acts completely different. | 24/ 0 | 2.50/ 0.0 |
| Your friends may see your father drunk if they visit your home. | 25/ 0 | 4.08/ 0.0 |
| Your home environment seems almost unbearable. | 24/ 5 | 4.54/3.00 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Your father does not appear interested in your successes. | 19/ 5 | 3.90/3.00 |
| The police come to your home because of your father's benavior. | 12/ 1 | 3.83/3.00 |
| Your mother is inconsistent in her behavior. | 11/10 | 3.70/2.40 |
| Your father is missing for a number of days. | 9/ 0 | 3.44/ 0.0 |
| The household duties are neglected during your father's drinking bouts. | 12/ 0 | 2.92/ 0.0 |
| Your mother isn't doing anything to make your family situation better. | 11/ 3 | 4.00/2.67 |
| Your father loses his job. | 11/ 0 | 3.91/ 0.0 |
| A family outing is seriously disrupted by your father. | 25/ 2 | 4.36/3.50 |
| Your mother is frequently angry. | 17/ 7 | 4.12/3.29 |
| Your father comes home drunk on your birthday. | 12/ 0 | 4.08/ 0.0 |
| Your father is extremely ill after drinking. | 20/ 4 | 3.60/2.50 |
| You are frightened by your father's behavior. | 25/ 4 | 4.40/3.50 |
| Your father is depressed. | 22/ 9 | 3.77/2.56 |
| Christmas is seriously disrupted by your father. | 17/ 2 | 4.47/3.00 |
| Your father comes home drunk very often. | 26/ 0 | 4.08/ 0.0 |
| You are disgusted by your father's behavior. | 27/ 6 | 4.07/3.33 |
| Your father is at home while on an extended drinking binge. | 18/ 0 | 4.44/ 0.0 |